DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 896 RC 021 771

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TITLE	Charter Schools: An Approach for Rural Education? ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-98-3
PUB DATE	1999-01-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002012
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348; Web site: http://www.ael.org/eric/ (free).
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Charter Schools; Educational Change; Educational Policy; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Experimental Schools; *Institutional Characteristics; *Rural Education; School Community Relationship; Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Charter schools have emerged in the 1990s as a prominent and controversial school reform idea. This digest discusses characteristics of charter schools, tentative research findings, advantages and disadvantages, and implications for rural communities. Since 1991, 33 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school legislation. An estimated 1,129 charter schools existed nationwide in September 1998, mostly in the South and West. Differences in state laws produce wide diversity in the organization, operation, and philosophies of charter schools. Recent studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education show that individual states vary widely in policies related to charter schools, that charter schools tend to be small, that parents tend to choose charter schools because of dissatisfaction with public schools, and that charter schools tend to have different grade configurations from other public schools. Charter schools are generally intended to produce high-performing students, but hard data on their effectiveness are lacking and results appear mixed. Arguments for and against charter schools are listed. Charter schools may offer educational alternatives to rural communities, which might set up schools that are community-based, educationally appropriate to local needs, innovative, accountable, and focused on student success. However, inadequate resources in many rural communities could cause problems. Community influences on a rural charter school's success are discussed. (Contains 21 references.) (SV)

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EDO-RC-98-3 January 199

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Charter Schools: An Approach for Rural Education?

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Charter schools have emerged in the 1990s as a prominent and controversial school reform idea. This Digest describes characteristics of charter schools, outlines some tentative research findings, discusses advantages and shortcomings, and summarizes challenges rural communities might face in starting such a school.

What We Have Learned About Charter Schools

In some ways, charter schools are traditional and tap historic rural roots of public education. They give parents, students, and educators public school alternatives based on the idea that competition will bring educational innovations (Thomas, 1996). But there is potential for controversy, especially in poor rural communities with limited financial and educational resources to support additional schools.

Since Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991, 32 other states and the District of Columbia have passed similar legislation (Hirsch, 1998). The Center for Education Reform (1998) estimated 1,129 charter schools existed nationwide in September 1998. Most schools were in the South and West. Half were in three states: Arizona, California, and Michigan. Almost another quarter were in four other states: Colorado, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas. While the number of charter schools has increased rapidly since 1991, these schools represented only about 0.5% of public school students in charter states during the 1996-1997 school year (RPP International, 1998). It is unclear how many were in rural areas.

Differences in state laws bring wide diversity in the organization, operation, and philosophies of charter schools. Some states give charter schools considerable autonomy, while other states exercise more control. The charter sponsor may be a school district, college or university, state education agency, teachers, parents, or other community members (Molnar, 1996).

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1997) says charter schools offer autonomy in exchange for accountability. Schools receive freedom and a limited time (often five years) to experiment with organization, curriculum, and other aspects of the school (also see California Department of Education, 1992, and Harrington-Lueker, 1994). The autonomy has a price; if the school cannot improve student performance, its charter can be suspended or revoked. In essence, the charter is a contract between those starting the school and an official body, such as a school board or state education agency (McCotter, 1995).

Two studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education offer a detailed look at charter schools nationwide (RPP International and University of Minnesota, 1997; RPP International, 1998; Hirsch, 1998). The ongoing studies will not deal with academic achievement for at least another year, but they have already provided valuable information. First, individual states vary in how they define the number, type, and operation of charter schools; who grants the charters; who may start the schools; who sets personnel policies; and the ultimate impact on public schooling. Arizona and Colorado provide examples of this variation with regard to who grants (sponsors) the charters. Applicants in Arizona seeking to establish a charter school submit a written proposal to a sponsor, which may be either a school district governing board, the state board of education, or the state board for charter schools. A charter school proposal can be for a new school or for an existing school (Arizona Department of Education, 1998). In Colorado, parents, teachers, and community members may develop a charter school application. The group must negotiate with the local school board on autonomy. No minimum size is defined, but the school must be nonsectarian and cannot be home-based or an existing private school (Windler, 1998). While charter schools are part of the local district, in practice, they have great autonomy (Education Commission of the States, 1997).

Second, there is no "typical" charter school, but they tend to be small (60% have fewer than 200 students) and newly created schools (60%) instead of being established schools converted to charter status. Compared to statewide averages, they tend to have a similar racial composition, a slightly lower proportion of students with disabilities, a lower proportion of limited-English-proficient students, and about the same proportion of low-income students.

Third, parents and students tend to choose charter schools because of dissatisfaction with public schools. Parents and students are attracted to charter schools because of their high standards, small size, and supportive environment. Program flexibility or a highly structured school environment also is important.

Finally, according to U.S. Department of Education funded studies, charter schools tend to have different grade configurations from other public schools, such as kindergarten through grade 12, kindergarten through grade 8, and ungraded schools (RPP International, 1998).

Other studies have shown charter schools may focus on a particular subject area, such as agribusiness (Mahtesian, 1998); interdisciplinary curricula or technology; more traditional, back-to-basics curricula; or innovative instruction. Some charter schools serve diverse student populations, and some are inadequately funded or housed (Medler, 1997).

Generally, charter schools are intended to produce high-performing students (Sautter, 1993). Reasons for starting charter schools include encouraging innovative teaching, creating professional opportunities for teachers, promoting community involvement, and improving student learning and performance-based accountability (Molnar, 1996).

Charter schools remain experimental, and it is too soon to judge their effectiveness (Medler, 1997). So far, results appear mixed; hard data are lacking and much evidence is anecdotal. Pipho (1997), for example, notes both success stories and tales of mismanagement. Based on early evidence, Harrington-Lueker (1994) questions whether charter schools can deliver high-quality programs or serve low achievers well. Thomas and Borwege (1996) point out that the rural Minnesota New Country Charter School[1] has received national recognition for its course-free structure, individualized learning, and technological emphasis (also see Thomas, 1996, and Nathan, 1996). The school, which occupies three storefronts in Le Seur (MN), is able to reallocate its resources to fund academic programs and technology because it has no administrators. Hirsch (1998), who briefly reviews research findings from various states, says studies of academic performance are inconclusive and show both successes and failures.

Advantages and Shortcomings

Pipho says the unifying philosophy of charter school proponents is based on the "free-market idea of breaking the monopolistic hold of local school districts and the freedom of offering new kinds of alternative schools" (1997, p. 1). This premise is the flashpoint of controversy with defenders of traditional public school systems.

Several observers have outlined arguments for and against

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charter schools (McCotter, 1995; Harrington-Lueker, 1994; Molnar, 1996; O'Neil, 1996; and Sautter, 1993).

Advocates argue that charter schools

- tend to be small, which allows increased attention for students;
- are public schools operating outside the establishment, which could help change existing public schools;
- emphasize performance and standards;
- take creative and innovative approaches without excessive bureaucracy and rules;
- stand for something, such as a particular set of values or pedagogy;
- offer more options for parents and children;
- provide new teaching opportunities;
- take responsibility for results, not inputs, such as time spent in class;
- operate under the direction of parents and community members;
- are able to reach dropouts and other at-risk students;
- appeal to legislators;
- replace failing schools; and
- can help deal with the next enrollment boomlet.

Opponents warn that charter schools

- are unable to waive rules seen as barriers (e.g., health and safety regulations, contract laws);
- ignore the fact that parents' decisions on where to school children are based not only on academics, but also on proximity of the school, work schedule, after-school care, and extracurricular activities;
- create competition, which means economic ideas predominate, not educational ideas;
- are virtually impossible to establish in poor areas because it is costly to create surplus capacity for schooling that competition requires;
- increase the potential for use of public funds for private or home schooling;
- affect few students due to the limited number of charters;
- increase competition for scarce dollars and result in net financial loss to a school district because students attending the new school do not necessarily reduce the sponsoring organization's costs;
- increase privatization of education, although education historically has been a public good;
- endanger public schools with special interest curricula;
- risk becoming elite facilities, doing little for at-risk students;
- create isolation based on race or ethnicity;
- have shown neither a logical nor demonstrated relationship to increased achievement;
- could make school boards legally responsible for schools they don't control; and
- are less accountable.

Charter Schools and Rural Areas

Mixed research findings suggest charter schools are not a panacea for rural education reformers. Even so, charter schools work well in some rural areas, and may offer educational alternatives to rural communities. Depending on state law and local conditions, rural communities may be able to set up charter schools that are community-based, educationally appropriate to local needs, innovative, responsive to accountability measures, and focused on student success. Rural communities with a history of community cooperation and inclusiveness, a vision that allows students to pursue educational alternatives, and the desire for a sustainable small school could provide fertile ground for a charter school (for example, Thomas & Borwege, 1996).

There are caveats. Nearly all charter schools face obstacles (RPP International and the University of Minnesota, 1997; RPP International, 1998) that could be formidable in rural areas, including resource limitations, conflicts with other educational entities, and regulatory issues. Kusimo (1998) describes the current trend toward racial segregation in the rural Black Belt. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision, all-White schools were set up in the South using public funds. Charter-granting organizations would need to guard against the possibility of charter schools being used as a contemporary mechanism to advance resegregation.

Many rural areas are resource poor, and shortages of start-up or operating capital and inadequate facilities could cause problems for a charter school. It is important to have strong community support that includes backing from educators, financial and in-kind contributions, and a continuing development effort (for example, see Thomas, 1996).

Many rural areas still have relatively close-knit communities, but internal conflicts, battles with local and state educational agencies, and disputes over regulations can damage community well-being and sap the vitality of the charter school. According to RPP International (1998), though, conflicts with state education agencies have declined in recent years.

The charter school experiment appears dual-edged. For rural areas, the focus on school improvement might unify citizens. But poor economic conditions and conflicts might threaten these positive efforts. A charter school might be successful if a community faces the loss of its school because of consolidation or if there is an atmosphere that supports educational alternatives. Chances for a charter school's success depend on a community's historic context and its citizens' will to persevere in their pursuit of high-quality education for their children.

[1]See the Minnesota New Country School Website: http://mncs.k12.mn.us

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

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